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ABSTRACT

Previous research on physical attractiveness stereotypes about marriage have used stimulus individuals in isolation. To examine these attractiveness stereotypes using couples as targets, 72 college students (36 females, 36 males) rated eight photographs of four male-female couple types. Members of each couple were either matched (attractive male/female, unattractive male/female) or different (unattractive male/attractive female, attractive male/unattractive female). Judgments were obtained on the couples' likelihood of marital success, compatibility, parental competence, and sexual involvement. An analysis of the results showed that couples matched in attractiveness were seen as being more likely to be successful, compatible, and parentally competent than unmatched couples. The attractiveness of individual couple members had no such effect on these items. Relatively attractive male and female couple members were also perceived as being more sexually active than unattractive individuals. These results tend to support a "matching is good" marital stereotype, which implies that perceptions of others' social happiness and success are not determined solely by ascribed physical attributes, that others are seen as achieving a more desirable status if they are seen as conforming to the matching stereotype. (BL)

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Physical Attractiveness Stereotypes About Marriage: Attractiveness Matching is Good

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Abstract

Previous stereotypes about attractive individuals' marital success were rather favorable (e.g., "beauty gets the best of it"). However, judgments in previous studies were made of individual photos. We hypothesized that when judgments are made of photos of "marital couples" (placing judgments within a marital context), couples composed of members who are relatively matched in attractiveness (no matter whether couple members are of high or low attractiveness) would be seen as more maritally successful than unmatched couples. Our hypothesis was supported in that matched couples were seen as relatively more successful, compatible, and parentally competent. The results were discussed in light of the previous attractiveness stereotypes, and a "matching is good" marital stereotype was proposed.

Author Notes

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Physical Attractiveness Stereotypes About Marriage: Attractiveness Matching is Good

Marital stereotypes regarding attractive individuals have been found to be quite favorable. Dion, Berscheid, and Walster (1972) found that relatively attractive men and women (pictured in facial photographs) were perceived to be more likely to get married, to have happier marriages, to be more competent spouses, and to be more likely to find acceptable marriage partners than relatively unattractive others. Dion et al. summarized these results as reflecting a "what is beautiful is good" stereotype. Dermer and Thiel (1975) replicated and extended the Dion et al. study. They employed facial photographs of females and used a more extensive questionnaire. Consistent with the "what is beautiful is good" stereotype, relatively attractive women were rated as being more understanding spouses and responsive sex partners, and experiencing greater social happiness than relatively unattractive target persons. However, relatively attractive women were also seen more likely to request divorces and have extramarital affairs than unattractive women. Dermer and Thiel proposed that beautiful women are not always stereotyped as "good" people (in terms of traditional Judeo-Christian mores), in that they are also seen as immoral people who "get the best of it" in this world.

It is the present authors' contention that both the Dion et al. and Dermer and Thiel studies did not ask for marital responses in an appropriate way because marital questions were directed towards stimulus individuals "in isolation." Other variables such as perceived likelihood of getting married, which is greater in value for relatively attractive individuals, could have affected or even mediated previously attained results regarding

marital success (e.g., unattractive individuals may be seen as less likely to have successful marriages because they are seen as less likely to get married). We believe that marital ratings are more directly interpretable when marital judgments are made in a marital context. Specifically, subjects should be presented with photos of (purportedly) married couples, and should be requested to make marital perception ratings of the individual couple members (i.e., of the individuals within the dyad) or of the couple, itself (i.e., of the dyad).

The present authors believe that when marital perception ratings are made within a marital context, the similarity of the individuals within couples is the critical determinant of perceived marital success. Considerable research indicates that individuals actually tend to date and marry others who are similar to themselves in attractiveness (Cavior and Boblett, 1973; Murstein, 1972; Shepherd and Ellis, 1972; Silverman, 1971). One explanation for these findings is the "matching hypothesis," first suggested by Goffman (1951). He said that when considering marriage, people tend to size up their social attributes (e.g., level of intelligence, physical attractiveness) and decide whether their assets approximate their mate's. To the extent that they perceive they are of equivalent social "market value," they are more likely to form a viable relationship. Because matching has been observed "in the field," it is quite feasible that people hold the stereotype that "matching is good" when they predict a couple's marital success and satisfaction.

Bar-Tal and Saxe (1976) analyzed the perceived marital happiness of individuals within a marital (couple) context. They employed an individual level of analyses to directly examine the effects of one couple member's attractiveness on the other couple member. Specifically, they presented photos composed of four couple types (attractive male, attractive female;

attractive male, unattractive female; unattractive male, attractive female; and unattractive male, unattractive female), and they asked questions directed towards individual couple members. While they did not directly examine the effects of matching on perceived marital happiness, their data appears to support an attractiveness-matching stereotype. Specifically, unattractive male and female couple members were seen as more maritally happy when paired with unattractive mates ($\bar{X}$'s = 5.09 and 5.42, respectively) than when paired with attractive mates ($\bar{X}$'s = 4.67 and 5.10, respectively). In addition, attractive female couple members were seen as more maritally happy when paired with an attractive mate ($\bar{X}$ = 4.84) than when paired with an unattractive mate ($\bar{X}$ = 4.41). The only exception to this pattern of results was that attractive male couple members were seen as slightly more maritally happy when paired with an unattractive mate ($\bar{X}$ = 4.26) than when paired with an attractive mate ($\bar{X}$ = 4.16). These differences between means may be significant since Bar-Tal and Saxe found a significant interaction between the male and female couple members' attractiveness as a determinant of marital happiness ($F(1,120) = 4.05$, $p < .05$). (Bar-Tal and Saxe did not examine specific differences among the individual means.)

We proposed that previous marital tests supporting the "what is beautiful is good" or "what is beautiful gets the best of it" stereotypes failed to take the context of those judgments directly into account. In the present study, photos of four couple types were presented (the same types of "couples" as were presented in the Bar-Tal and Saxe study were employed). Most marital ratings were made about each couple as a unit, although some questions were directed towards individuals within the couple. We employed marital success, compatibility, parental competence, and sexual involvement (with each other) items as dependent variables because most of the items had been used in the Dermer and Thiel study (applied to individual stimulus

persons) and because these items seemed to cover the major domains of marriage. We hypothesized that couples composed of members who were relatively matched in attractiveness (regardless of whether they were of high or low attractiveness) would be perceived as more maritally successful, compatible, parentally competent, and sexually involved with each other than couples composed of members who were not matched in attractiveness.

Method

Subjects

A total of 72 participants (36 females and 36 males) enrolled in introductory psychology courses at a large midwestern university took part in the experiment in partial fulfillment of a class requirement. These subjects were randomly assigned to 4 groups (18/group) serving as within-study replications.

Materials

Pictures

Twenty-five individual facial photographs (1" x 3/4") of high school sophomore females (n=10) and males (n=15), were selected, from ten-year-old yearbooks, to vary in attractiveness. Nineteen subjects independently rated each photograph on a 1-to-10 scale, where 1 was labelled "very unattractive" and 10 was labelled "very attractive." The two most attractive females, the two most attractive males, the two least attractive females, and the two least attractive males were selected for the experiment. The means and standard deviations of those photos were: $\bar{X}$ = 7.4 and 7.5, S = 1.32 and 1.39, respectively for the attractive females; $\bar{X}$ = 6.8 and 7.4, S = 1.32 and 1.84 for the attractive males; $\bar{X}$ = 3.8 and 4.0, S = 1.96 and 1.64 for the unattractive females; and $\bar{X}$ = 4.3 and 3.9, S = 1.45 and 1.57 for the unattractive males.

The eight photos were used to create four male-female couple types. The attractiveness of the members of each couple were either matched (attractive male/attractive female or unattractive male/unattractive female) or different (unattractive male/attractive female or attractive male/unattractive female). There were four replications of each couple type by creating all possible opposite sex pairs (i.e., there were four unique couples within each couple type).

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was composed of a total of 20 items, over half of which were drawn from the questionnaire used by Dermer and Thiel (1975). Most of Dermer and Thiel's items were modified to apply to couples. Also, new items were added to the current questionnaire in order to obtain more comprehensive indices of marital success and satisfaction. All items were constructed in the same style as those of the previous authors. Two questionnaire sections followed the cover story. The first was labeled "Marital Predictions Regarding the Couple," and included questions such as "How likely is it that this couple was eventually divorced?" These 14 items were answered on 6-point scales, 1 being "extremely unlikely" to 6 being "extremely likely." The one other questionnaire section was labeled "Global Judgments" and contained six questions, the same three items being asked about the female and male targets. One of these items was a manipulation check in which subjects rated the physical attractiveness of the members of each couple on a 0-10 point scale, while the other items (assertiveness, pleasantness) served to disguise the intent of this section (and were not analyzed).

The data consisted of responses to a total of 16 items, repeated for each of four couple types, made by 4 groups of raters (serving as replications). Four of the 14 marital items were intended to tap marital success

(i.e., likelihood that: this couple eventually was divorced, this couple eventually was separated, the members of this couple have felt trapped in a stale marriage, this couple has had a satisfying marriage). Responses to these items were aligned for directionality of response (i.e., the higher the score the greater the marital success). The average intercorrelation between the responses to these four items was calculated by converting the six correlation pairs within each couple type to Z scores by using Fisher's r to Z transformation, averaging the Z scores, and then by converting the average Z score back to an average correlation coefficient. The average r's were .67, .62, .58, and .58 for couple types 1(AM/AF), 2(UM/AF), 3(UM,UF) and 4(AM/UF) respectively, and so these items were summed within each couple type to create a marital success index.

Another four of the marital items were intended to tap marital compatibility (i.e., likelihood that: the man has been an understanding spouse, the woman has been an understanding spouse, the members of this couple have respected each other, the members of this couple have been inconsiderate to each other). After going through the same steps as on the marital success items, the average r's were found to be .52, .29, .38, and .31 for couples types 1, 2, 3, and 4, and these items were summed to create a marital compatibility index. Furthermore, another two of the marital items were intended to tap parental competence (i.e., likelihood: this couple has had children, this couple has raised its children well). These items were significantly correlated within couple types 1 through 4 (the r's were .53, .59, .36, and .31, respectively) and were summed to create a parental competence index. Finally, four of the marital items were intended to tap sexual happiness (i.e., likelihood: the man has been a responsive sexual partner, the woman has been a responsive sexual partner, the man has had an

extramarital affair, the woman has had an extramarital affair). These items were not highly correlated as compared to the other indices for couple types 1 through 4 (the average r's were .26, .16, .32, and .16, respectively), and only one-fourth of the individual correlation pairs were significant. Thus, these items were examined individually.

Procedure

Four groups of subjects completed the questionnaire. As in the Dion et al., and Dermer and Thiel studies, these subjects were informed that they were taking part in a study on the accuracy of person perception, the purpose being to compare the person perception accuracy of untrained college students with trained professionals. In the present study, subjects were also told that the photos were taken when the couples were sophmores in high school (around 10 years ago), that they had married, and that some were now married; whereas the others were now divorced. The subjects' task was to compete with the trained professional in predicting the couple members' current marriage status quo. They were asked to try to be as accurate as possible in responding on the basis of the visual information provided, and they were told that their responses would be anonymous.

The experimental room was arranged with four tables, five chairs to a table. Subjects were allowed to sit at any table they wished and were provided with a packet (face down) consisting of the cover sheet of instructions plus four sets of the questionnaire, one for each of the four couples they would be rating.

A male photograph was placed on the left of a female photograph to identify a particular couple. The pictures of the couples were distributed, one to a table, and were exchanged when everyone had finished the first questionnaire set. This procedure was repeated four times at which point

all the subjects had rated all four couples. Photos were counterbalanced for order of presentation within each group of raters. Subjects were allowed as much time as they needed to make their ratings (judgments on all four couple types took each subject about one hour).

Results

Facial Attractiveness Manipulation Check

Analyses of subjects' judgments of couples members' attractiveness revealed tht the manipulation had the expected effect. Attractive males and females means were 7.3, 6.8 and 7.7, 7.6, respectively, while unattractive males and females means were 3.8, 3.8, 3.4, and 3.1. Standard deviations ranged between 1.8 and 2.2.

Couple Marital Success, Compatibility, and Parental Competance Analyses

The effects of couple members' attractiveness, sex of judge, and replication (four groups of judges), on judgments of either couple marital success, compatibility, or parental competence were examined with three repeated measures analyses of variance using REGM, a multivariate general linear model hypothesis program (Wilkinson, 1975). Each model employed two between-subjects independent variables, replication (each group of judges saw different male-female couples in photos portraying four attractiveness combinations) and sex of judge. Also, each model employed three within-subjects variables, the attractiveness of the male stimulus, the attractiveness of the female stimulus, and an interaction of these two stimuli (the matching hypothesis would be supported by an interaction effect). These within-subjects measures were examined by doing univariate contrast analyses of questionnaire responses. (Four responses to each questionnaire item had been obtained by measurements over the four male-female couple types.) Overall tests of significance were provided

for the within-subjects variables (the contrasts) to see (1) if any of the contrasts differed significantly from zero and (2) if any of the contrasts were statistically affected by any of the between-subjects variables.

As seen in Table 1, couples matched in attractiveness were seen as more maritally successful than unmatched couples ($p < .005$), and no effect was found for the individual couple member's attractiveness ($p < .1$).

Insert Table 1 about here

Compatibility and parental competence responses also supported the matching hypothesis; that is, couples matched in attractiveness were viewed as more maritally compatible ($p < .005$) and parentally competent ($p < .005$) than unmatched couples. For marital success and satisfaction, the individual attractiveness of couple members was not found to be relevant ($p < .1$); however, for parental competence, the attractiveness of the male photo (not the female) was found to have a significant influence in addition to whether or not the couple members were matched (i.e., there was one main effect and one interaction). Specifically, while matched couples were most likely to be seen as good parents ($p < .005$), attractive male members were also seen as boosting parental competence ($p < .05$).

Sexual Involvement Items

Results for the other four marital items, which were analyzed individually using the same type of REGM model as was employed to test the first three of our hypotheses (i.e., the same independent variables design), are shown in Table 2. Both male ($p < .05$) and female ($p < .05$) individual photos affected the perception of the female couple member's responsiveness as a sex partner. The female couple member was seen as being most likely

to be responsive if she and her mate were attractive, and she was seen as least likely to be responsive sexually if she and her mate were unattractive. Both the male ($p < .01$) and female ($p < .0001$) photos, and their interaction ($p < .0001$), determined the perception of the likelihood that the female couple member would have an extramarital affair. The female couple member was more likely to be seen as having an affair is she was attractive, especially if her mate was not attractive. The male couple member was more likely to be seen as a responsive sex partner if he ($p < .0001$), and if his mate ($p < .05$), was attractive (i.e., both male and female photos affected the ratings of this item.) On the other hand, he was seen as more likely to have an affair if he was attractive ($p < .0001$), regardless of the attractiveness of his mate ($p < .1$). To summarize the sexual happiness results, relatively attractive males and females were seen as being the most likely to be responsive sex partners and have extramarital affairs, whereas relatively unattractive persons were seen as being the least sexually involved, overall. Thus, the sexual involvement with mate items were not seen as reflecting a "matching is good" marital stereotype.

Sex of Judge and Replication Effects

Sex of judge effects were found in one of our analyses. Male judges perceived the attractiveness of the male target as being a more important determinant of the female's responsiveness as a sex partner than did female judges (sex of judge multivariate $F(3,65) = 3.08$, $p < .05$; male target univariate $F(1,67) = 9.13$, $p < .005$).

Replication effects were found in 6 of 11 REGM analyses done. However, an examination of cell means between groups on each of the variables indicated that the replication effects were due to differences in

the strength of the previously reported patterns, rather than due to differences in the form (i.e., direction) of these patterns. In summary, male and female raters, with 4 replications, gave a similar pattern of responses across the questionnaire items. In addition, 10 of 11 REGM tests of our hypotheses, and of Dermer and Thiel replications items, were significant at an overall (multivariate) $p < .05$ level, suggesting that it is very unlikely that the results obtained were due to chance alone.

Discussion

Matching and the Attractiveness Stereotype

The "beautiful is good" hypothesis (Dion et al., 1972) asserts that attractive people are seen as more likely to be competent spouses and achieve marital satisfaction (because they are "good" people), whereas the "beautiful gets the better of it" hypothesis (Dermer and Thiel, 1975) asserts that while attractive people will be seen as more understanding spouses and will experience more social happiness, they will also be seen as more likely to request a divorce than less attractive people (i.e., they are treated as "good" marital partners although they do some "bad" acts). The present study found that couples matched in attractiveness are seen as being more likely to be compatible, competent as parents, and achieve successful marital outcomes than couples not matched, whereas the attractiveness of individual couple members had no such effect on these items (aside from the positive influence of attractive males on perceived parental competence). Thus, there appears to be a "matching is good" stereotype that determines perceptions of how attractiveness relates to marital functioning when judgments are made "in context." This "matching is good" hypothesis is very different from previous hypotheses because it implies that perceptions of others' social happiness and success are not determined solely by

ascribed physical attributes, that others are seen as achieving a more desirable status if they are seen as conforming to the matching stereotype.

As mentioned in the introduction, married couples are more likely to be similar in attractiveness then non-married couples (e.g., Cavior & Boblett, 1972; Murstein, 1972). The present results indicate that not only is matching a phenomenon observed in actual mate choice, but it also appears to operate as a stereotype in our impressions of marital success. Future studies could try to examine what the relations are between a "matching-is-good" stereotype and real-world marital success. Murstein and Christy (1976) failed to find relations between equity of middle-aged couple members' physical attractiveness and marital adjustment scores ($\bar{X}$ years of marriage = 15.4, SD = 9.4). Perhaps the "matching-is-good" stereotype only operates towards the beginning of marital relationships. This possibility remains to be examined.

What Is Still Good About Beautiful Mates?

Attractive individuals are seen as more likely to be sexually active within and outside of the marital relationship. One gets the impression that while both attractive-matched and unattractive-matched couples are seen as happy, the attractive-matched couples are seen as having lots of sex; whereas the unattractive-matched couples are seen as sitting on the back porches of their houses rocking (happily) away in their rocking chairs. The present study is in agreement with Dermer and Thiel's in that both studies found that relatively attractive stimulus persons are seen as more likely to have extramarital affairs. This is quite in line with a "beautiful gets the best of it" hypothesis in that, in our study, attractive people are seen as being able to play the field while not necessarily suffering marital complications. Also, within a social context, a "beauty gets the best of it" stereotype was applicable to sexual items.

In summary, we found that when ratings were made within a marital context, attractiveness-matching was found to be the critical determinant of marital success, compatibility, and parental competence. Our results

tend to partially attenuate the importance of the individual-directed stereotypes (i.e., beauty is good or gets the best) as determinants of social outcomes, as well as highlighting the importance of making person perception judgments in a social context. Alternatively, relatively attractive male and female couple members were perceived as more sexually active within and outside of the relationship, suggesting that there may be social contextual influences of a "beauty gets the best of it" stereotype.

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Table 1

Means and Manova Results for Marital Success and Compatibility and Parental Competence Criteria

Dependent Variable Item	Dependent Item Means for the Different Couple Types				Couple Type Contrasts	Couple Type Contrast F Values (df=1,67)		
	AM/AF	UM/AF	UM/UF	AM/UF	Overall (Multivariate) F Values (df=3,65)	Male Attractiveness Effect	Female Attractiveness Effect	Male x Female Effect (e.g., matching)
Marital Success	14.58	13.11	15.24	13.08	3.49*	.09	.07	10.16***
Marital Compatibility	16.60	15.46	16.26	15.17	3.68*	.02	1.82	10.46***
Parental Competence	8.53	7.60	8.24	8.03	3.57*	4.29†	.19	8.71***

*$p \leq .05$

**$p \leq .01$

***$p \leq .005$

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Table 2

Means and Manova Results for the Sexual Involvement Items

Dependent Variable Item	Dependent Item Means for the Different Couple Types				Couple Type Contrasts Overall (Multivariate) F Values (df=3,65)	Couple Type Contrast F Values (df=1,67)		
	AM/NF	UM/AF	UM/UF	AM/UF		Male Attractiveness Effect	Female Attractiveness Effect	Male x Female Effect (e.g., matching)
Woman has had an extra-marital affair	3.32	4.18	2.11	2.33	34.78****	7.97**	101.97****	16.28****
Man has had an extra-marital affair	3.49	2.69	2.63	3.97	15.38****	41.94****	1.76	2.03
Woman has been a responsive sexual partner	4.75	4.31	3.67	3.93	12.26****	4.78*	28.75****	.54
Man has been a responsive sexual partner	4.61	3.56	3.44	4.29	13.29****	35.56****	3.55	.50

*$p \leq .05$

**$p \leq .01$

***$p \leq .005$

****$p \leq .0001$

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